

State Supreme Court justice urges straight talk on racism

Gonzalez visits Vancouver for forum on developing Latino leadership

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Washington State Supreme Court Justice Steven Gonzalez describes the progress that's been made and the ongoing prejudice faced by Latinos in the United States during a Latino leadership-development forum at Vancouver City Hall on Tuesday afternoon. (Steven Lane/The Columbian)

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One day when he was driving away from a meeting with some legal clients, Steven Gonzalez was stopped by a police officer who asked him if he needed directions out of town.

It's the kind of thing that used to happen to Gonzalez when he was a kid in California, working late nights and driving home in the early hours of the morning. And it still happens nowadays, he said, even though he's climbed the ladder from attorney to prosecutor to judge to a justice on the Washington State Supreme Court. Gonzalez was appointed to a vacant seat on the court in 2012, then ran for and won the same seat for a full six-year term.

Gonzalez said his looks and his name mean that many people don't consider him American, certainly not capable of such a professional leadership position. A new dental hygienist once sized him up and told him he doesn't look like a judge, he said.

The retort he couldn't choke back was that she looked just like a dental hygienist.

But Gonzalez doesn't recommend sarcasm as a way to bridge racial divides or raise anybody's consciousness. During an afternoon forum at Vancouver City Hall aimed at developing Latino political leadership, keynote speaker Gonzalez said the task in this deeply divided time is to figure out how to speak honestly about racism and oppression that endures. The event was hosted by the Sea Mar Community Health Centers and the SW Washington League of United Latin American Citizens Council.

Look no farther than ongoing, racially driven protests and riots in places such as Ferguson, Mo., and New York City — and even Seattle and Portland — to know that America is still grappling with racism, he said. In the wake of the Ferguson grand jury's decision not to indict a police officer for fatally shooting an unarmed black man, Gonzalez pointed out, one poll found that white people generally thought the jury did "just fine" while black people generally found that the grand jury was "completely wrong."

"We are very fractured in this nation," Gonzalez said.

The police officer and the dental hygienist who made assumptions about Gonzalez based on his appearance probably would have been surprised to learn that he's Jewish — his father's side was Mexican but his mother's was Russian Jew — and that he never spoke any Spanish until he insisted on learning it in his 20s. By then, he was also traveling abroad and learning Japanese and Chinese, as well. There, too, he was told that he didn't "look American," he said.

Therefore, Gonzalez dismisses the high-minded claim that so many people — white people — make these days that they are simply “colorblind.”

No one is colorblind, Gonzalez insisted.

“Of course, we see race. We see it all the time,” he said. The challenge is “not to pretend, but to admit we make judgments about what we think it means.”

Those judgments are frequently wrong, he said.

Colorblindness is a claim made by privileged people who don’t need to think about race, he said.

“Not seeing race is a luxury you have only if you’re part of the majority,” he said. “The rest of us have to deal with it far too often.”

Not long ago, he said, his son had to deal with being called a “dirty Mexican” by a soccer teammate; the family was also treated to somebody yelling “This is Klan country!” at them on the street. Both incidents took place where Gonzalez and his family live, in liberal bastion Seattle.

“We are, all of us, what an American looks like,” he said.

Three choices

How do modern American Latinos take their rightful place — leadership roles — in American society? By getting involved, getting confident — and realizing their numbers, several speakers emphasized.

Thirty-six percent of Washington residents are nonwhite “people of color,” and they are better educated and more ambitious than ever before, according to Cathy Allen, a professional political strategist and campaign manager who delivered something resembling a pep talk to the group of about 50 people who attended the Vancouver forum.

What Latinos need more than anything, she said, is confidence. The message they grow up with is that their “glass is half empty. That’s not how most white American kids grow up,” she said.

Gonzalez said that Latinos have three choices: to conform to mainstream culture (which “kills who you are”); to conform to the negative stereotypes (it’s easy and powerful); or to pursue your dreams, individuality, education and ambition. But get ready for that mainstream culture to label you “pushy, bitchy, arrogant” if you rise above its low expectations for you, he said.

Enrique Cerna, an executive producer and host at KCTS public television in Seattle, shared some segments of a show he produced called “Latinos Changing the Face of Washington.” And he shared results of a 2013 statewide scientific survey that found that negative stereotypes of Latinos are shrinking but persistent.

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